



# **Semi-Annual Lesson Report: Information Advantage in Peace and Security**

**October 2023**

## Free Speech is an Information Advantage, JLLIS #230806-5091

**Observation.** Following the Arab Spring civil protests in 2011, there was a significant decrease in the percentage of civil resistance movements that successfully achieve their stated goals. Ensuring nations honor their citizens' free speech is essential to peaceful democratic processes. As free speech suppressing technologies become ubiquitous, the opportunities to settle polarizing disputes below the threshold of violent armed conflict proportionally decrease. Therefore, civilian and military leaders operating within the international relations domain must understand why the decline has occurred and give outlets to elevate citizen voices without relying upon violent armed conflict.

**Discussion.** The most notable social movement in recent history was the series of anti-government protests in 2011, known as "the Arab Spring."<sup>100</sup> The Arab Spring began in December of 2010 when a Tunisian street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated in response to the confiscation of his wares and harassment from municipal members of his local government.<sup>101</sup> Bouazizi's act catalyzed the Tunisian Revolution, which involved 28 days of civil resistance, protests, and social media content.<sup>102</sup> WikiLeaks played a supporting role in the protests, with leaked documents revealing the corruption and repression by the Tunisian regime.<sup>103</sup> The protests led to the ousting of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and eventual democratic elections.<sup>104</sup>

The unrest in Tunisia inspired similar movements in Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Sudan, with minor protests in Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Western Sahara.<sup>105</sup> Social media played a pivotal role in the spread of the demonstrations, as seen in research of the power of social media to support collective action movements.<sup>106</sup> However, these lessons learned are not necessarily about the Arab Spring but lessons gathered by observing governments in a post-Arab Spring world.

The movement resulted in seven overthrown governments, policy reforms occurring in six countries, and four civil wars.<sup>107</sup> Citizens with their eyes toward democracy and government reforms were not the only ones to notice these dramatic results. Governments began implementing controls and safeguards to reduce the likelihood of an Arab Spring repeat.<sup>108</sup> Following the Arab Spring, two things changed that

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<sup>99</sup> Marcucci, et al, "Informing the Global Data Future: Benchmarking Data Governance Frameworks."

<sup>100</sup> Abdul QadirMushtaq and Muhammad Afzal, "Arab Spring: Its Causes And Consequences," *Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society*, 2017, <https://www.international.ucla.edu/cseas/article/267292> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Simon Mabon, "Aiding Revolution? Wikileaks, Communication and the 'Arab Spring' in Egypt," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 10 (November 1, 2013): 1843–57, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01436597.2013.851901> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>104</sup> QadirMushtaq and Afzal, "Arab Spring..."

<sup>105</sup> Adnan Abdulrahman Naef Farhan and P. A. Varghese, "Facebook Utilization and Arab Spring Movement: A Study among Yemeni Youth," *International Journal of Social Sciences and Management* 5, no. 1 (January 20, 2018): 5–9, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322627363\\_Facebook\\_Utilization\\_and\\_Arab\\_Spring\\_Movement\\_A\\_Study\\_among\\_Yemeni\\_Youth](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322627363_Facebook_Utilization_and_Arab_Spring_Movement_A_Study_among_Yemeni_Youth) (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> "The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What's the Legacy of the Uprisings?," *Council on Foreign Relations*, accessed August 29, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

dramatically favor the efforts of oppressive governments. First, the academic research field of predicting civil unrest exploded, creating opportunities for governments to predict risks to their regimes and act against them. Second, technologies advanced to the point that a government willing to spend large amounts of money can influence the information domain and gain an advantage. As a result, the percentage of successful non-violent social movements plummeted from 19.8 percent before the Arab Spring down to 4.34 percent afterward.<sup>109</sup>

One possible reason for the decrease is simply an issue with the data. After all, a two-sample test revealed a rejection of the null hypothesis (that there was no difference in the proportion of successful civil resistance movements before and after 2011) at a significance level  $\alpha$  (alpha) that is less than or equal to 0.05618 (in other words a confidence level approximately 94.38, slightly below the conventional threshold of 95 percent). Additionally, there is a possibility that there is an insufficient sample size in the post-Arab Spring group, given that there were 518 data points before 2011 (4.666 average resistance movements per year) and only 87 afterward (12.43 average resistance movements per year through 2019). While it is certainly a possibility that the change is a statistical anomaly, there is nothing to be learned by chalking change up to chance; instead, let us examine the changes oppressive governments have made in response to the Arab Spring to reduce the likelihood of it repeating.

Civil unrest prediction involves analyzing social media, technology, and social science data to identify trends and attempt to regress future behavior based on previous patterns.<sup>110</sup> Generating effective protest predictive models in democracies has benefits that reduce economic and social risk while enabling governments to preemptively implement policies that may appease the protestors, reduce the likelihood of occurrence, and better serve democracy. However, for the authoritarian regimes attempts to keep their citizens docile and submissive, this predictive ability of civil resistance also provides opportunities to be more aggressive in their operations to silence dissent.



One example of this is in Iran, where citizens rose in protest after a 22-year-old Kurdish woman named Mahsa Amini died following detainment by Iranian morality police and detention at a reeducation center.<sup>111</sup> The Iranian government arrested thousands during the protest, and over 300 died.<sup>112</sup> In August of 2023, predicting that protests would occur in September in conjunction with the anniversary of Amini's death, the Iranian government preemptively arrested likely protestors and their families.<sup>113</sup> A significant

<sup>109</sup> Erica Chenoweth, Jonathan Pinckney, and Orion A. Lewis, "NAVCO 3.0 Dataset" (Harvard Dataverse, November 6, 2019), <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/INNYEO> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>110</sup> Kamrul Islam et al., "An Online Framework for Civil Unrest Prediction Using Tweet Stream Based on Tweet Weight and Event Diffusion" 19, no. 1 (February 6, 2020): 65–101, <https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jict/article/view/jict2020.19.1.4> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>111</sup> Mahsa Rouhi, "Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran," *Survival* 64, no. 6 (November 2, 2022): 189–96, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2022.2150441> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> "Iran Rounds up Activists and Relatives of Killed Protesters Ahead of Mahsa Amini Anniversary," <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/iran-rounds-up-activists-and-relatives-of-killed-protesters-ahead-of-mahsa-amini-anniversary/ar-AA1fFRSr> (accessed August 29, 2023).

lesson learned for the post-Arab Spring world is to not give similar regimes the tools to oppress their people more efficiently.

Governments worldwide have begun to develop propaganda armies of fake social media accounts called "sockpuppets."<sup>114</sup> Government-run *sockpuppet* social media accounts for peddling propaganda, centrally controlled censorship, internet filtration tools, internet shutdowns, and advanced surveillance systems are staples for global authoritarian regimes.<sup>115</sup> The Russian Internet Research Agency and the Chinese "50 Cent Army" are two examples that have gained media prominence in the US.<sup>116</sup> The networks of fake accounts push government-backed themes and reduce the prominence of government detractors.<sup>117</sup> Oxford University's *Computational Propaganda Research Project* analyzed social media manipulation and found evidence of organized social media manipulation campaigns by governments or political parties in 81 countries.<sup>118</sup> With the increase in individuals voices stifled, it is difficult for legitimate movements to control the narrative and achieve their objectives.

Surveillance and censorship technologies are a profitable market, beyond giving governments the tools to silence dissent quickly. Through collecting biometric information (such as gait, facial measurements, voice, and DNA), governments can pinpoint participation in opposition movements and track down individuals. Social media provides the perfect supplement to state-sponsored surveillance and gives repressive governments all the tools needed to generate an enemy list and dispose of them with little resistance. If citizens continuously provide their data to internet-based programs, they feed the information machine with the tools to oppress them and thwart their resistance. Journalists have long known the necessity of privacy and security to enable their work and keep the identities of their sources confidential. However, citizens in dangerous situations may not have the tools necessary to protect themselves and remain private. Following the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, anyone who had supported the United States suddenly became a target for the Taliban.<sup>119</sup> With no US presence on the ground, there was no means of teaching individuals in danger how to protect their identity. The necessity of privacy and security is the third major lesson of the post-Arab Spring World.

**Recommendations.** In a post-Arab Spring world where oppressive governments can predict future civil resistance movements and unleash advanced technologies on their citizens, who have no privacy or security skills, it may seem hopeless to support peace and stability. However, the war in Ukraine provides some hope in this domain, where their genuine content has fought against Russian artificial content and is winning.<sup>120</sup> Ukrainian social media demonstrates the second major lesson of the post-Arab Spring world: real people are more potent than bots and sock puppets. Therefore, some recommendations include:

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<sup>114</sup> Brad Stone and Matt Richtel, "The Hand That Controls the Sock Puppet Could Get Slapped," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/16/technology/16blog.html> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>115</sup> "NIC-Declassified-Assessment-Digital-Repression-Growing-April2023.Pdf," <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/NIC-Declassified-Assessment-Digital-Repression-Growing-April2023.pdf> (accessed August 29, 2023).

<sup>116</sup> Tim Hwang and L. Rosen, "Harder, Better, Faster, Stronger: International Law and the Future of Online PsyOps," 2017, <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2017/02/Comprop-Working-Paper-Hwang-and-Rosen.pdf> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> "CyberTroop-Report20-Draft9.Pdf," <https://demtech.oii.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/12/2021/02/CyberTroop-Report20-Draft9.pdf>, (accessed August 29, 2023).

<sup>119</sup> Charles J. Sullivan, "Afghanistan in Anarchy: America's Withdrawal, Taliban Rule and Regional Implications for Central Asia," *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs*, October 30, 2022, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/23477970221129908> (accessed September 30, 2023).

<sup>120</sup> "Cyber and Information Warfare in Ukraine: What Do We Know Seven Months In?," *Baker Institute*, September 6, 2022, <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/cyber-and-information-warfare-ukraine-what-do-we-know-seven-months> (accessed August 29, 2023).

First, the US State Department with the Department of Defense must develop a privacy and security curriculum that it can distribute through encrypted means to individuals suffering from oppression. Distributing the curriculum may look like accessing a multi-relay browser (such as the one from the TOR project), a temporary public website through a discreet platform, or even a file sent over an encrypted messaging app. This curriculum could potentially be sent to US-aligned personnel in Afghanistan to teach themselves how to obscure their identity better and remain safe despite being pursued. In areas with a US Embassy or military presence, personnel could provide in-person instruction to ensure that the people who need it most are afforded the tools to survive.

Second, governments should advocate for social media platforms that require identity verification as a prerequisite for use. With authoritarian government access to limitless numbers of fake social media profiles, platforms are responsible for cleaning up their platforms and ensuring that users are legitimate. Unfortunately, social media companies' monetary value relies upon monthly active users, so they have an incentive to ignore fake profiles. Creative incentive programs could offset the costs of removing fake profiles and enforcing universal user verification programs. If banks, schools, utilities, and libraries require user verification, should the primary weapon of the information war not need it, too? When used with a fake-profile bounty program, which would pay users for uncovering foreign government fake social media profiles, social media could return to its original intent of connecting people and away from its role as an authoritarian government tool for oppression.

Third, while research into predicting social movements has a legitimate purpose, it creates a liability for individuals who may seek to engage in those movements. Fortunately, there are a variety of non-governmental organizations that train citizens in social movements and understand this dynamic. Those organizations must hire academic staff members who understand the predictive models and which flags arise to indicate an impending movement. By knowing the flags, trainers can consciously avoid those activities and ensure their movement can proceed without oppressive intervention.

Without actions to ensure individuals can express themselves and control their destinies, it seems likely that the success rates for social movements will continue to decline. It is no coincidence that as the success rates for social movements decline, the global democracy ratings are also declining.<sup>121</sup> When citizens have control of their destiny, they can demand policies that respect their free will. However, when oppressive governments can control narratives, preemptively arrest protesters, and track down every dissenting opinion, the places where peace can flourish will continue to decline.

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<sup>121</sup> Lucia Garcia, "Democracy Index 2021: Less than Half the World Lives in a Democracy," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, <https://www.eiu.com/n/democracy-index-2021-less-than-half-the-world-lives-in-a-democracy/> (accessed September 30, 2023).